

EAST BLADEN

Defending league champs eager to repeat

Quick facts

6-0 conference, 14-1 overall
Lost to Tarboro in state 2A semifinals
Coach Lenon Fisher (31st year)

Departed

Senior guard Andrew Geathers anchored the offensive line and represented East Bladen in the Shrine Bowl, an annual all-star game that pits the best from North Carolina against the best from South Carolina. "Our biggest loss was our offensive line from one end to the other," Fisher said. "They were key for us. They made our team last year."

The versatile bruiser Phil Wilson lined up at tight end, fullback and linebacker for the Eagles last season, averaging more than five yards per carry. He was a first-team all-conference selection.

Darrell Lesane, a first-team all-conference running back, gained 849 yards and scored nine touchdowns last season.

Returning

Athletic quarterback Daron Burney was a second-team all-conference selection a year ago. "He was a sophomore last year and did a real good job for us," Fisher said.

A.J. McKoy, a junior running back, rushed for nearly 1,600 yards last year and was a second-team all-conference selection.

A senior two-way starter at fullback and linebacker, Xavier McKoy rushed for 737 yards on just 99 carries last fall. "There are several schools looking at him," Fisher said about the chiseled team leader.

Sophomore Antonio Murchison is expected to start at running back and defensive back. He was a

second-team all-conference pick in 2009.

Rasheem Smith and Saquan Johnson give the Eagles a speedy and sure-handed pair of senior wide receivers. Both were second-team all-conference picks last year.

Coach Said It

On replacing 19 graduated seniors, including seven first-team all-conference players

"We only had seven juniors on the team last year. We've got the kind of team with the inexperience that if the coaches do what they should we'll get better every week. If the kids work, keep their heads up and don't let adversity get them down we'll be all right."

On East Bladen's goals for the 2010 season

"Our goal is to get better every week. If our offensive line comes around we'll be pretty good on offense. If they don't, we'll be pretty bad."

On how Fisher has been able to sustain success

East Bladen has won its conference five years in a row and has lost just two league games in the last seven years. The Eagles bring a 17-game conference winning streak into this season. Overall, they've had double-digit wins six of the last seven years, won at least one playoff game seven years in a row and made it to the third round or farther each of the last four years. East Bladen won 14 games in 2008 and again in 2009.

"We have good players, kids who are willing to work and willing to make sacrifices and give up things. If you get kids like that



Photo courtesy of the Fayetteville Observer
East Bladen junior running back A.J. McKoy is one of several returning Eagle ball carriers. McKoy will combine with speedster Antonio Murchison and smasher Xavier McKoy to give Lenon Fisher's team one of the best group of backs around. But East Bladen's rushing success this year will depend on their ability to replace much of a departed offensive line, including graduated Shrine Bowl lineman Andrew Geathers.

you'll be successful."

On retirement (Fisher is 62 years old and has been coaching high school football for 40 years, including the last 30 at East Bladen)

"I guess I'll know when it's time. If I stop enjoying it I'll get out. As long as I enjoy it and don't hurt the team I'll keep on trucking."

SOUTH COLUMBUS

Loaded backfield could erase Stallions' memory of 2009

Quick facts

2-4 in conference, 4-7 overall
Coach Jake Fonvielle (2nd year)

2009 was a down year by the admittedly high standards in Tabor City. The Stallions won 10 conference titles between 1998 and 2008, largely the work of revered head coach Joey Price. But he left for Wallace Rose-Hill before last year, meaning South Columbus alum Jake Fonvielle took the reins.

The struggles of 2009 left some yearning for the glory days of Price. But the good news for Stallions fans is Fonvielle's team should bounce back this year with an abundance of returning talent.

Granted, the Stallions lost mammoth defensive lineman Ethan Farmer to the University of North Carolina, and tackling robot Jonathan Buffkin. But they return a budding stud in junior Darquale Richardson and have playmakers in the secondary.

Offensively, there is talent as well. Senior Brian Riggins is unquestionably a game-changer, the only issue being where to use his speed and shiftiness on the offensive side of the ball. Junior Rontonio Stanley should be the primary ball carrier, and he's one of several Stallion backs that if shown the slightest crease can take the pigskin to the house. Fonvielle still has a looming question mark at the quarterback position with sophomores Reno Duncan and Pharoah McKeever duking it out for the starting gig.

Departed

Ethan Farmer leaves a big hole in the South Columbus d-line and Fonvielle needs some younger players to step up and plug the gap. A bigger loss may be linebacker Jonathan Buffkin, a tackling machine that roamed the gaps that Farmer created on the defensive line. Farmer headed to the University of North Carolina while Buffkin will play for Catawba College this autumn.

Returning

Richardson needs to step up on the defensive side of the ball for the Stallions. He's started since his freshman year and will be eager to assume the mantle of next dominant South Columbus defensive player. A big junior year could see Richardson emulate Farmer and head to a major BCS program.

Stanley and Riggins should take a lot of the pressure off of whichever young QB wins the starting job. Riggins is drawing a lot of recruiting interest, though what position he plays is still up in the air. Most colleges after him seem to prefer him as a defensive back.

Coach said it

On South Columbus' strongest attributes

"We've got our whole backfield back and that's going to be a plus for us. We've got a senior back there with a couple of juniors, a lot of experience and that's going to be a real positive for us."

On tough non-conference schedule

"If you can come out of that healthy it really helps you in our conference. I think we've got one of the toughest conferences. Everybody's going to be up this year, got a lot of people coming back, so I think it's going to be down to trying to survive each other's games from week to week."

Surprise package for South Columbus

"We've got a fullback that could do some real good things for us this year. Robert Lee is a big, short guy, real strong."

Two sophomores competing to start at QB

"We're hoping for them to grow up fast. They are sophomores and the speed of the game is going to affect them early but hopefully we can get some success early and they'll grow up quickly."



Schedule
August
20 Open
27 East Columbus
September
3 Loris
10 Open
17 at Hoggard
24 West Bladen
October
1 at West Columbus
8 at South Brunswick
15 North Brunswick
22 at East Bladen
29 Whiteville
November
5 at West Brunswick



Photo by Jim Harper
South Columbus junior Rontonio Stanley is a back with serious quickness. His shifty running style makes him a tough tackle, and when he breaks through the line his speed means he usually ends up in the end zone.



Photos by Bret McCormick
Sophomore quarterback Pharoah McKeever (above) towers over his teammates at 6-foot-6. McKeever has three excellent backs to hand the ball to, making his transition into the starting lineup considerably easier. Junior linebacker Darquale Richardson (right) is a punishing hitter and assumes the Stallions' defensive leader role this season.

